

The energy transition in México: Towards a post-petroleum era

Contributed by Miguel Valencia
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Editor's note: Mexico is all too ignored by the U.S., despite mutual reliance on energy and other sectors of the economy. The capital city is faced with huge new road projects, continuing destructive globalization based on cars and oil. Environmental activists gathered July 24 in Mexico City to discuss energy downshifting or "powerdown", where Miguel Valencia made his presentation which follows below. It is also in Spanish on our website at La Transición energética en México. - Jan Lundberg

The Energy Transition in México: Towards a Post-Petroleum Era

Fifth Downshift Colloquium, Mexico City

In recent years we have received much bad news, most of it related to oil consumption. These developments were expected but no less ominous. More than one million people have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan by the U.S. invasion; the disappearance of large portions of the ice shelves of Antarctica; doubling or tripling in world prices for cereals; soaring world figures of violence against women, children, the elderly and migrants; unprecedented costs of the destruction caused by hurricanes, typhoons, floods, droughts, forest fires; 54 countries are now poorer than in 1990; a billion people have no access to clean drinking water; the north pole shows this summer no ice. The oil era begins to show its worst face: the ecological, social and political collapse of the world. But it is not the end of the world; it is the end of a world, the world of cheap oil in which we have lived for many years.

The oil consumption that started at the end of the 19th century has been a time of horror, marked by wars without parallel in history. We have seen the rapid destruction of cultures, identities, species, habitats, rivers, seas, lakes; the explosive growth of population, consumption, production of garbage and hazardous waste, and urbanization; the destruction of the social fabric; the emergence of a global tyranny based on science and technology and the emergence of related apocalyptic threats, such as nuclear failures, the nano technology cloud and the uncontrolled genetic contamination, in addition to the twin threats: Peak Oil and Climate Change. The oil era has virtually destroyed any ability for local autonomy and self-reliance, has concentrated the world power in the hands of few persons and has centralized major decisions like never before in history, which has generated such social addictions and dependences that now it is very difficult to consider an energy transition that is not catastrophic or apocalyptic. There is no way to ignore these scenarios, which should be the paramount social, economic and political consideration.

Other news also leads us to believe that the end of the era of oil is approaching: the extraction of oil in deep waters or in the Arctic Sea; the rapid growth of the agrofuels industry; the feverish construction of hydroelectric plants, solar farms and wind poles; the growing political pressure in favor of nuclear energy; the statements of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in relation to global warming; the decline of the automotive industry; the radicalization of militarism and the fight against terrorism; the proliferation of study groups and social and political action on energy/environment/ungrowth, and, of course: the trends in world oil prices and the decline of U.S. as a world power. These are all indications of the beginning of an energy-transition world.

The decline in Mexico in the past 25 years, its heavy cultural, economic and political dependence; its ecological and social devastation, its political polarization; its increasing war against drug trafficking; the derangement of Pemex in the past 10 years, among others aspects, we can recognize as regional effects of the end of the oil era and the beginning of the energy transition in our country. The great national debate this year on oil reform is undoubtedly a consequence of the global impact of the energy issue.

However, the end of the oil era could appear after much bigger collapses than the ones we see now. Few people in the world realize how much we rely on oil for survival, and few investors and politicians dare to publicly acknowledge the possibility of a collapse related to global peak oil production. Due to excessive governmental and corporate manipulation of information and opinion, and the extreme lack of awareness of the vast majority of the world's population regarding the energy issue, it may cause an abrupt or catastrophic end of the oil era. Within weeks, this collapse may trigger a panic never seen in human history that can break all the governmental systems we know. It may happen that in such days to come, when we see collapse of production and distribution, it will be very difficult to get food for our families. Within a few weeks, governments, institutions, and dominant values and symbols may break down. Suddenly money, property and employment might serve very little in these circumstances.

Energy consumption, after a certain threshold, as Ivan Illich said, destroys the relationship between human beings. The human coexistence disappears when there is excessive energy consumption; the human being is upset: drug addiction,

alcoholism, flight into the virtual world (technofantasy), violent sports. These reveal the existence of excessive energy consumption. We may add that this consumption also destroys the foundations of our survival: blasting the gifts of nature and totally degrading the environment. The United States exceeded this threshold, probably since the 19th Century: it should now reduce its energy consumption at least tenfold, considering justice alone. Europe should reduce its consumption by approximately seven times, the Mexican middle class should reduce it at least a quarter, to curb the disaster ahead. It is therefore imperative that Mexican citizens begin to become aware of the terrible calamities and hazards involved in oil consumption particularly as the foundation of excessive energy consumption. It's time to start a great national mobilization for slashed oil consumption, for a radically reduced energy consumption; this is the key political, economic and social proposal we need to act on, in the face of the threats of the end of the oil era and climate change. We have very little time to react.

It is urgent that we abandon the frequent use of automobiles, aircrafts or fast trains; that we stop eating imported food. We must also stop using imported clothing and tools; avoid using too many machines and equipments for survival; depend less of the state and the market. There is an urgent need to denounce the corporate economy and technocience as pernicious cults of mankind; that we terminate the ideology of progress, development and modernity; that we liberate from the megamachine that makes us a gear of the system; that we depart from the consumer-work society. It is urgent to begin a full re-location of politics, lifestyles and economies, that we get closer to the countryside and manual activities; a return to frugality and cultural diversity; relearn the sense of things that are free or gratis; return to nature and rediscover the authenticity of life. Time and space must afford another sense for us. It is essential to rebuild modern institutions and change our world view: it is necessary to create other symbols, other values. It is compelling to: "Revalue, Reconceptualize, Restructure, Redistribute, Relocate, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rehabilitate, Reinvent, Restore, Renounce, among the many Rs that have been proposed in the world. Those who have the heaviest ecological footprint in our Mexican society have to reduce their consumption. Downshift must be equitable and radical.

Not only should we change our way of life, as it is essential to cope with the threat of Peak Oil and Climate Change, is also necessary to resist the ravages of globalism. NAFTA and the other "agreements." the National and Local System. A social and political resistance is necessary against those who want to deny or minimize the importance of radical reduction in oil consumption and energy in general. Resistance is also necessary against those who believe in only the scientific and technological solutions, such that the energy transition means promoting the adoption of renewable energies, such as Mario Molina, Greenpeace and most environmentalists. The niche business that opens the end of the oil era serves only to evade the main predicament: the waste of energy that characterizes this predatory era of cheap oil. Neither eco-efficiency, advocated by enterprise, or renewable sources of energy, serves to deal with the twin threats: Peak Oil and Climate Change.

To cope with the energy transition in Mexico, it is indispensable to boost national mobilization for the downshift in oil consumption and energy in general; a mobilization of conscience, to avert the high probability that there will be a humanitarian catastrophe in our country: We must leave behind oil consumption by means of a frugal life and austerity; by means of convivial activities. It is necessary to organize downshift groups in the communities, institutions and cities of México.

DOWNSHIFT OR BARBARITY!

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Miguel Valencia Mulkay presented the above address at the Fifth Downshift Colloquium (Descrecimiento), July 24, 2008. The location was the Procuraduría Ambiental y de Ordenamiento Territorial del Distrito Federal, PAOT, México City. Around 50 people participated, coming from several universities, environmental organizations, and social movements. Other lectures were given by Dr. Enrique Leff, renowned Mexican writer on ecological thought; Jean Robert, author of *The Betrayal of Opulence*; Dr. Américo Saldívar, economy studies in the National Autonomous University of Mexico; Rene Torres Bejarano; professor in the School of Mechanical Engineers in the National Polytechnic Institute, and Rafael Huacuz, from the Center for Urban Studies, Colegio de México.